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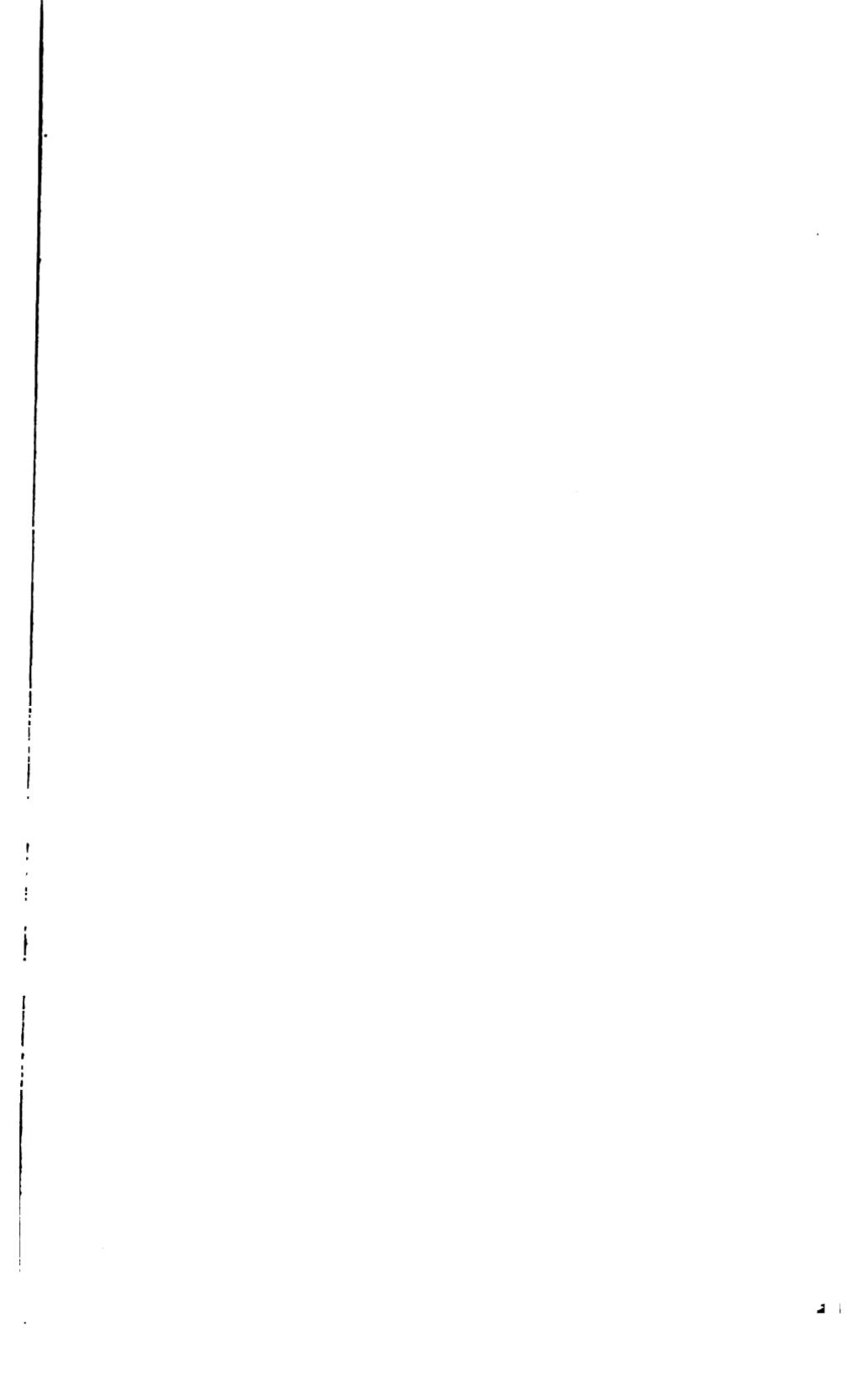
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# The Round Table Series

VI.

# DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

*POET AND PAINTER*

[McEachron, P. Co.]

EDINBURGH: WILLIAM BROWN

26 PRINCES STREET

ESTD 1787

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THE following Essay is the work—the most mature *literary* work—of the late Peter Walker Nicholson, Artist, whose sad and sudden death in the autumn of last year deprived Scottish art of one of its most promising votaries, and cut short a career fraught with sanguine interest to all who watched it. Mr. Nicholson took a warm interest in this Series, as is witnessed by his contribution of the happy and graceful design for the cover, and had promised to revise the present Essay with a view to its appearing therein. This, unfortunately, he had not accomplished, and the Essay came into the editor's possession pretty much as it was originally read before the Dialectic Society of the University of Edinburgh. With the exception, then, of the alterations absolutely necessary when an address to an audience is changed to an essay for readers, the original MS. has not been departed from. It will be only just, then, that the reader should bear in mind that the Essay lacks those finishing touches which the maturer judgment and skill of the author would certainly have bestowed upon it.



## DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

FIFTY years ago there was a decided reaction towards mediævalism. In England it affected religion ; on the Continent it affected art. The pale nerveless works which crowd German galleries were mostly the outcome of this renaissance. Cornelius and Overbeck were the chief factors in beginning, as their pictures are very powerful reasons for ending, the German phase of this movement. In England, however, it bore splendid fruit. The Oxford movement in religion, either directly or indirectly, turned men's minds to the stagnant state of affairs generally. The time was ripe for a new departure in art. In poetry the old traditions had been swept away long before by Burns, later by Scott, Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. Tennyson, Browning, and Mrs. Browning, Arnold, and Clough were the voices which one by one broke into song. But art was still imprisoned. Turner, it is true, had done work for all men and for all time. He had painted the labour and sorrow and the passing away of men. But his work was too phenomenal, too individual ever to found a school sufficiently broad to reform art in all its various fields.

His work was too often misunderstood, or too often admired on account of the very qualities in it least worthy of praise. His work was too elemental, too

absolute in its dominant qualities ever to cease being individual. So art still continued bound in spite of Turner's divine subtlety of changing light and wandering shade, of up-soaring splendour of the moon, of calm quiet beauty of noonday, of supreme gleam of crimson and glowing sunlight gold, of fading mists and tremulous sweetness of clouds, of dim mountain distances and far withdrawn glories of tumultuous sun-kissed seas. Ruskin wrote the first and second parts of "Modern Painters," reducing to science the wayward and instinctive works of Turner. But the end was not yet. Art was more hopelessly commonplace than before. The great style of Gainsborough, of Reynolds, had been vulgarised by the successive efforts of Copley, West, and Lawrence, and to a still greater extent by their followers. Based chiefly on the work of Constable and Bonnington, a new art was rising in France. As yet it was not recognised. Millet and Corot, Daubigny and Rousseau, were making a stand against the so-called Heroic School, as in literature, years before, a similar stand, or rather a very decided onslaught, had been made by Victor Hugo and Théophile Gautier against the stilted classicism of the Academy.

In England there duly arose the now famous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The more I examine their work the more clearly I am of the opinion that the whole movement originated with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, partly because the early work of all these men was very much of a similar nature—a similarity which has ceased as each painter found his individuality, while the characteristics of the early work of Rossetti continued to be present in all his work done afterwards. And this quality which we now recognise as

distinctively his, was in the earlier days of the Brotherhood common to them all. This feeling was so strange, so utterly removed from any other phase of contemporary artistic thought as at once to attract attention. It is scarcely necessary to say that it also attracted ridicule. This ridicule seems requisite for the existence of any new movement. It is what Carlyle would call its "baphometic fire-baptism." This so-called Pre-Raffaelite Brotherhood proved its vitality by surviving this very torrent of baptismal abuse.

Briefly and broadly the aim of this scheme was to return to nature from the pedantic style of the Heroic School, with their lofty ideas as to the unfitness of ordinary truth, with their so-called Raffaellesque grace and Raffaellesque nobility, which required backgrounds of Palladian architecture and trailing drapery before all other things;—who called it needful in the case of one figure being dark against light, that another should be light against dark, that the hands of one should be up and the hands of another down, and various other stringently requisite duties of opposition, with the single exception perhaps that utter inanity of expression in one countenance was not regarded as a sufficient reason for any differing expression in any other. These good people went their way mightily pleased with their improvements, their balancing, their triangular, their circular, their elliptical compositions, with their improved scheme so far in advance of uncomposing, unbalancing nature, who, *tant pis pour elle*, had not invented renaissance architecture, nor renaissance juxtapositions of dark and light, nor renaissance garments in the days of the apostles and prophets and evangelists, whose stately posings and vague grandiose gesticulations these painters dreamed of.

This was the attitude of the later Pre-Raffaelites. This, to paint things as they were, or, in the case of historical work, as they might reasonably be imagined to have happened, not as they might be fancied grandly or nobly to have happened. It was more than a mere technical revolution: it was the infusion into art of a new soul. In the work of Rossetti, with whom I more particularly deal at this time, there was a force of imagination, a present beauty subtle, sweet, benign, a quiet mystical, spiritual loveliness unknown to art since the days of Fra Angelico and Botticelli. The very soul of Mediævalism was in these monks,—that high, pure, intense consciousness of infinite existence, of which this life is but a (momentary manifestation, in a realm filled with angels and the souls of men and women.) In his picture of Mary's girlhood, the angel with long crimson wings, flamelike and radiant, is as real as the Virgin embroidering the lily, as St. Anna with her quiet patient look, as St. Joachim trimming the vines in the dim, sunny garden without. I, for one, feel beyond all question that the painter of this and of the Annunciation saw and felt the presence and reality of the one as clearly as of the others. Further, that this was to him no mere myth, no mere beautiful story, but what was long ago in Galilee. The Annunciation with its utter simplicity: the awakened girl with a faint look of expectation in her eyes, as she gazes at the angel beneath whose feet are flames, bearing a lily, again seems to me to give this feeling of reality. To the Virgin the angel is no strange unknown presence; she has no fear, only a subtle expectation, a half-dazed wonder as one awakened from sleep. It seems to me that this picture is more essentially truthful, more expressive of

reality than any others I have seen. We feel that the Virgin (as he wrote in his sonnet) was

An angel-watered lily that near God  
Grows and is quiet.

We feel the whole force of that simple uneventful life in the little Jewish village, with its calm sequence of dawn; its clear hushed day-time filled with small household duties and homely hopes and fears; the twilight with its period of dreamy rest, as the deep rich luminous sky stretches beyond the little leaves of the fruit trees in the orchard; the hushed night filled with the tender music of whispering winds; the stealing shadows in the moonlit room, the noiseless ministry of angels, the companionship of peasant folk, the yearly return of the Passover; all the gentle pensive inevitable course of life of those to whom now turns the prophetic soul of this great world dreaming of things to come.

I do not wonder that Rossetti (never showed his pictures in public) Among the work of an ordinary gallery his would be out of place, as those old French Lives of the Saints, with their delicate initials and quaint, beautiful illuminations with their childlike faith, would be out of place beside the turbulence of Victor Hugo, the polite sneer of Voltaire, the *soi-disant "naturalisme"* of M. Emile Zola. Rossetti's genius was of a nature alien from this age. To the British public, mediævalism seems rather an absurd theory. Its highest, holiest, aspirations seem at this time thin and trivial. It was this feeling that kept Rossetti from courting the public criticism. It was not as many suppose, an inferior knowledge of technique. His (colour was so pure, so gorgeous, so strong,) that no picture of the present day could stand beside it. Turner

no more effectively dimmed the Academy of his day than would Rossetti have dimmed the Academy of ours.

Here it may probably be most fitting that I should say some words on the nature of Rossetti's work before beginning a detailed notice of his poetry and painting.

It is my feeling that Rossetti had a fixed standpoint from which he looked at life; that he did not change this;—that his painting was not the expression of one phase, nor his poetry the expression of another phase; but that he recorded his single perception in two ways. So his poetry sometimes seems to bring the colour, the force, the realization of painting; his pictures have the subtlety, the symbolism, the expression in some degree peculiar to verse.

It is not an easy task to determine the place of Rossetti among poets and painters. To a certain extent his work is individual and unique;—he is of kin with those mediæval painters whose faint frescoes are quietly fading away in little Italian churches; he is of kin too with those unknown men who first formed the sweet, rough lines of the Border Ballads; with the latter, by virtue of his simple and direct way of looking at life, with the former by reason of his no less simple and direct manner of gazing beyond into a land of spirits of which this world is but the expression. But again, and as a secondary aspect of his genius, he had in him as counteractive (or rather I should say because) of these qualities, a very strong sense of bodily beauty. He felt the presence of the body so forcibly, because he was so keenly aware of the existence of the soul, because a (beautiful form is artistically the sign of a beautiful soul,) because the spirit cannot otherwise be seen by mortals. Pure and lofty deeds, a gracious and

beautiful form, these are the means in which the invisible is made visible. (Had Rossetti not been a painter by nature his poetry would have been vague, thin, visionary.) For his mind was of so mystical a nature, that had he not been very strongly aware of the symbolical form of expression, his verses would doubtless have been very intangible. For my own part, I feel that, in order to keep the balance at all, it was needful that he should have a more than usually powerful sense of outer existence. The result is a strange quality, reminding one in painting of the work of (Leonardo da Vinci). Like the Italian master, the chief charm of his pictures is in the expression of feature. But there is now and again a more splendid and majestic beauty than is usually to be found in the work of the painter of *Mona Lisa*. The art of (Giorgione) is suggested by the broad rich masses of colour, now clear and luminous, now gleaming in sombre and sacred fitness of chord, by the stately repose of his men and women, whose calm of body and soul seem one with the dimly stealing light of quiet twilight hours. For them the tumult of life has passed away ; its din has become hushed, whatever of sin and sorrow, of joy and sweetness has been theirs, exists now only as a memory.

Side by side with those qualities, and to some extent because of them, are these other characteristics very noteworthy in his verse, of (great tragic power, of large grasp of the essential features of life). The very breadth of his view of these things tends to disable his force in this field. His knowledge, or rather, perhaps, his feeling, was not sufficiently minute to give mastery of character—he is subtile, but it is (subtilty of symbolism and thought and emotion) rather

than subtlety of circumstance and action for which he looks.

At the age of seventeen Rossetti wrote his poem, "The Blessed Damozel." It is hard to find words fitly to express the emotions touched by these verses. Higher and purer and sweeter than any words in this English tongue, they gently bear the listener beyond this earth into a calm and sacred air, yet not beyond all changes of pure human hope and fear, and high and holy love. In this poem, and these two, "The Portrait" and "The Stream's Secret," are drawn the two sides of a lasting love, a love that outlives death and change. The poems seem to me to be, with the sonnets, the most individual work Rossetti has done. There is a touch of Dante in them; but to modern men there is little likeness. Indeed, the only man in present day literature (except, of course, those who are avowedly his pupils), the only man who has the same sort of qualities as Rossetti, is Cardinal J. H. Newman. Newman represents the dogmatic and logical side of mediævalism as Rossetti represents the mystical side. Both look beyond the shows of the world; each passes somewhat into the special field of the other. I doubt if my meaning will be plain except to those who have studied carefully the "Hymn" and the "Dream of Gerontius." There is in both men a simple, direct, almost childlike way of looking at death. It is the passing into another place; but the younger poet, unlike the elder, could not fancy any severing of the eternal love begun on earth. The feeling of his poem, "The Blessed Damozel," is essentially mediæval. The mediæval intellect was to a very notable extent realistic. It dealt with things and symbols, not Hegelian abstractions. It was artistic, pictorial. Hence

the "Blessed Damozel" is no dim far away spirit, but is subtly imagined as really living in heaven. The lover on earth cannot in his dreams separate her body from her soul. The one is the counterpart of the other. So the poem is filled with fine human touches. These are of infinite artistic value. The supernatural or spiritual is only of magical and passionate interest when it touches the borderland of mortal life; it is then to us a spiritualized humanity rather than a mysterious presence from an infinitely distant land. In the "Blessed Damozel" such touches are sparingly given, but always with unerring instinct. This insistence on the spiritual side of life is the dominant note of all his poetry. In the "Blessed Damozel" we can see how little difference he felt between life and love on earth and in the highest heaven. In the portrait we see how the lover remaining on earth makes his dead lady a centre for all thoughts and works till he should wake from the decay of life,

"Even so, where heaven holds breath and hears  
The beating heart of love's own breast,  
Where round the secret of all spheres  
All angels lay their wings to rest.  
How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,  
When, by the new birth borne abroad  
Throughout the music of the suns,  
It enters in her soul at once,  
And knows the silence there for God !

"Here with her face doth Memory sit  
Meanwhile, and wait the day's decline,  
Till other eyes shall look from it,  
Eyes of the Spirit's Palestine.  
Even than the old gaze tenderer;  
While hopes and aims long lost with her  
Stand round her image side by side,  
Like tombs of pilgrims that have died  
About the holy sepulchre."

In the sonnets he tells us that all sin as all good is lasting, that not only his lost love will meet him in the golden heavens, but how each lost day, each base action, will crowd around him with cold commemorative eye, saying:—

“ I am thyself, and I, and I,  
And those thyself to all eternity.”

For absolute sin is not so hideous in this man’s sight as these virtues which are vain, which bear no fruit, which droop and die; these are the sorriest things that enter hell. To him a real love is so pure, so noble, so holy, that he can imagine no change in it through all the æons of eternal heavenly life. But this belief did not, as it never will, keep back the feeling of utter loneliness and forlorn sorrow, the knowledge that the light of life has for a space fled away, the dreamy wandering in a twilight world, the awestruck, patient waiting, made luminous by a distant hope, that from out the sleep of the grave their souls should rise, through gleams as of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day to a more perfect life.

“ Those who walk in willow-wood  
With hollow faces burning white,”

weeping for the lost love on earth, which they shall regain, have visions of an after-time when the—

“ Wan soul in that golden air,  
Between the scriptured petals softly blown,  
Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown.”

“ Ah, let none other written spell soe’er,  
But only the one hope’s one name be there,  
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.”

If by any sad and desolate chance no future should be,  
where there is only left by death a fleeting memory of  
the past—

“Oh love, my love, if I no more should see  
Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,  
Nor image of thine eyes in any spring,—  
How then should sound upon Life’s darkening slope  
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,  
The wind of Death’s imperishable wing?”

Such a man could do no trivial work. To him all things appear, as to Spinoza, *sub specie eternitatis*. His every act he knew to live for ever,—his life on earth, his love on earth, to be but the beginning of a life and a love hereafter. The body to him was but a symbol, whose significance and preciousness lay in its being the tarrying place of the soul. Hence his work is of a great and grave character as befits the expression through all signs and symbols of the fair presences of which we and all we see are but the shadows. His paintings seem not so much transcripts of reality as of a dimly-seen translation, so to speak, of some far-off sound or colour well known, but too ethereal and too holy for mortal ears. For him the spirit world, “dumb to Homer, dumb to Keats, him even” had a voice, as it had to the returned soul of the dead man in the Platonic vision, who passed over the river of forgetfulness, but whose soul was not defiled.

“The best of art,” says Ruskin, “are but shadows.” Strange it may seem that this pale shadowy art of his, so fair, so subtle, so dim, should have a more real quality than those others whose work seems stronger and more lasting. His poems and pictures which seem most realistic are in reality the most symbolical. In

his "House of Life" he tells us how small things are of great moment, and how great things are of none avail. In this spirit and with this view of life was the "Blessed Damozel" written. As a work of art, it reaches a rare perfection; the touches of great, clear imagination, the charm of tenderly-chosen words, the superb reflux of music echoing between earth and heaven, as the Damozel speaks and her lover replies,—set this poem as peerless in English song. The force of imagination is shown in the touch telling how, as she leaned over the golden bar, the souls mounting up to God went by her like thin flames; how the bar on which she leant grew warm; how the old prayers granted, melt like a little cloud; or how the five handmaidens of the Lady Mary fashion birth-robes for those just born, being dead. The close of the poem is very quiet, a calm so great that (as the old dramatist says) "one might hear all the angels singing out of heaven."

"I wish that he were come to me,  
For he will come," she said.  
"Have I not prayed in heaven? on earth,  
Lord, Lord, hath he not prayed?"

For clear perfection of music, a melody more involved in its richness than that of the "Blessed Damozel," turn to "Love's Nocturne." Verse after verse, line after line, is filled with the glory of golden words, suffused by the dim air of dreamland. This poem is a good example of his mystical vision. The man in dreamland meeting his own soul, and sending it from thence to his lady, is a counterpart of a strange drawing, where he shows two mortals met by their ghosts. We can fancy the spirits to belong to the

future life of the youth and maiden, upbraiding them for the past. Like the *Lost Days* they rise each on a murdered self with awful presence. I have already referred to "The Stream's Secret" and "The Portrait." In the former poem he considers the stream as a symbol of the love first born by its banks. Very noticeable here are the fine references to landscape, to wit, the subtle touch of the invisible burthen of the "sun grown cold," and "the moon's labouring gaze," the lines indicating the rush of the stream in flood-time, the water lapping in the cave. In "The Portrait" is the fine simile of how these memories of old days are disavowed by day, and nought is left to see or hear.

"Only in solemn whispers now,  
At night-time these things reach mine ear ;  
When the leafy shadows at a breath  
Shrink in the road, and all the heath,  
Forest, and water, far and wide,  
In linkèd starlight glorified,  
Lie like the mystery of death."

"The Last Confession" is the poem in his first volume most like the "Rose Mary" and "King's Tragedy" in his second. Here he touches a realistic objective story, though he still keeps his subjective manner of thought. For it is noteworthy that in this poem the causes of the crime are entirely symbolical : the episode of the laugh, repeated by the child, could only be imagined by one of Rossetti's subtle way of thought ; the little incident of the Cupid, the dream of God blessing the world,—the whole texture of the poem is made up of symbols. The involutions, the inversion of time, the hesitancy, the clear memory of little things, the burning, searing picture of the day of death, remind one somewhat of Browning's supreme studies ; remind one of some portions of the "Ring

and the Book." - But this poem is different from the work of the elder poet. It is clearer,—I had almost said subtler. It is more monochromatic in its intensity than is Browning's usual work. At one point it touches one of those heights of tragic force reached in this century only by two men—Victor Hugo and Browning—when the confessing man tells the father to make certain of his meaning, lest by any chance, misunderstanding him, he give absolution:—

"If you mistake my words,  
And so absolve me, Father, the great sin  
Is yours, not mine: mark this, your soul shall burn  
With mine for it."

The remark following as to the "Latin shriekings" is alike of that high order of daring imagination. The more I read this poem, the more I am impressed by its enormous power. I rank it with the very finest work of Browning. Better it cannot be, and higher praise I cannot give.

Of Dante at Verona, time will not permit me to speak at length. It is a quiet, restrained piece of art, condensed and reticent to a quite marvellous extent, filled with picturesque lines as where he tells of how the lords of Florence saw the proscribed kneel in the dust on the shrine steps. Or again the lines telling of the life at the court of Can Grande.

This poem is a fine appendix to some of his pictures. The lines, telling how he met Beatrice in Florence, and again in Paradise, call to mind the noble colour and beautiful grace of the designs showing the earthly and the heavenly meetings. The last in the calm of Paradise, when the lady says, "Even I, even I am Beatrice."

"The Burden of Nineveh" is a very strong poem,

with a wide view of history, suggested by the sight of an Assyrian bull being borne into the British Museum. At some future time, he dreams, when London is in ruins, antiquarians may conclude from finding this sculptured beast that this was the manner of god we worshipped. The fate of Nineveh, with its pride and pomp, suggests the fate of other cities, when with sense half shut, —

“ He sees the crowd of kerb and rut  
    Go past as marshalled to the street,  
Of ranks in gypsum quaintly cut,  
    It seemed in one same pageantry.  
They followed forms which had been erst :  
    So hap, till on my sight should burst  
That future of the best or worst,  
    When some may question which was first,  
Of London or of Nineveh.”

And the bull seems a fit type of our modern life with its weight of superstition and care.

There is one verse to my mind as great an example of strong imagination as any other I ever read, and is always associated in my mind as an artistic triumph with the great burst of poetry at the end of Carlyle's description of the taking of the Bastille. The reference is of course to the temptation of Christ :—

“ The day when he Pride's lord and Man's  
    Showed all the kingdoms at a glance.  
To Him, before whose countenance  
    The years recede, the years advance,  
And said, ‘ Fall down and worship me.’  
    'Mid all the pomp beneath that look,  
Then stirred there haply some rebuke,  
    When to the winds the Lost Pools shook,  
And in those tracts, of life forsook,  
    That knew thee not, O Nineveh.”

One who so sees facts, necessarily has that gift of pro-

portion of relation, which is present in all great art, and without which no tragic power is possible, which enables one truly to estimate this life and all its changes. To see beyond the appearance, the manifestation, to the great unity of purpose underlying all things, is to see with clear vision the infinite course of human progress beyond the pathos of broken human hearts, the tragedy of thwarted human endeavour. It is to see the relative and half truth widely in the light of the absolute truth. It is (again to use the phrase of Spinoza) to see the world *sub specie eternitatis*.

This attitude applies to the next poem I mention—“Jenny.”

The motto prefixed to the poem showed that Rossetti was well aware how it might be received. But I do not think he was prepared to endure such calumny and misrepresentation as fell to his lot. The earliest and most virulent of his critics not long ago expressed great surprise that he could ever have so misunderstood the meaning of Rossetti’s work. So it is, I fancy, with many others. One constantly meets with people who talk of this poem as a very choice selection of evil. Again I ask, do you imagine that the great and grave genius, who wrote “The Blessed Damozel,” who wrote the sonnets “My Sister’s Sleep,” “The Card Player,” “The Burden of Nineveh,” “Dante at Verona;” who painted “The Girlhood of the Virgin,” “The Annunciation,” “The Passover in the Holy Family,” “The Virgin in the House of John,” the whole sequence of pictures relative to the *Vita Nuova* of Dante,—do you fancy he could do any ribald or trivial thing? I do not.

Of all work done in these days I know of none more pure, more intensely spiritual, more utterly removed

from any evil than that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, nor do I know of any poem which, when fully and closely understood, is more beautiful and sacred in its lofty purity than "Jenny." Indeed to it belongs the further merit of a triumphantly pure handling of a difficult subject.

Such themes may indeed be, nay, often are, evil; but in the hands of a great poet, never. By his very birthright he can utter nothing base. The poem "Jenny" is the frank recognition of a fact in life, but it is put in its proper light. No artist of any breadth can ignore such facts; but there are, unfortunately, people who can see very little else. Some of you may have noticed that Browning and Swinburne very often treat of the same subjects. But while Swinburne deals with a single emotion, Browning ranges afar, tracing from the first beginning, and following to the eventual end the workings of the passion. This largeness of thought, this keenness of vision,—this makes the elder poet's work of vast ethical import. It is the element in all dramatic writing, which in its absence makes littleness, and with its presence makes greatness. So in "Jenny," Rossetti traces the growth of the girl through life from the old days of childhood that seem to be—

" Much older than any history  
That is written in any book,  
When she would lie in fields and look  
Along the ground through the blown grass,  
And wonder where the city was  
Far out of sight, whose brawl and bale  
They had told her even for a child's tale."

From this to the present, terrible reality, looking forward to the yet more awful future, he sees the entire life, he traces the causes, he compares, he

weighs, he knows with subtle sympathy the fairer features, not wholly obscured ; the dim possibility of goodness not wholly passed away, the pity of it, the dumb anguish that looks beneath it all, its true relation to the infinite sorrow of this world.

But for largeness of style, for beauty and force of thought, for sweetness and directness of wording, for height and depth of passion, for steady continuous flow and development of motion, for the full expression of all his various qualities of lyrical and dramatic power, the first place among his work is beyond all dispute held by the "Rose Mary." No such poem has been written since the "Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel" of Coleridge. It has the richness of these poems. It has their strange mingling of reality and romance, their resonance and their rare perfection of finish. Into the bare stern land of Northern Legend, that land so often made splendid by heroic deeds and made sacred by song, where every glen and hillside has its weird tale of love or of death, he has brought another element—the talisman, the beryl stone, with its dim, cloudy companionship of Eastern suggestiveness, with its reminiscent touches of the clash of arms in far lands and in olden days, when crusader and Turk met in deadly fight, of strange, remote places, "where swart Paynims pray." From these gathered threads of glowing Eastern and weird Northern romance, he has woven a majestic poem. It deals with the tragic things of existence, with all its moods of clear and tender and sweet beauty, with all its dark, terrible sorrow, with its mysteries of love and of death, with its passionate, fiery emotions of anger and hate, its infinite, inevitable burden of fallen and faded human lives. These touches telling how Rose Mary read the vision in the beryl-

stone, how her heart fell as she knew that the future could only be seen by the pure, her complex, wandering thoughts as she beheld the lying pictures, the taking them for truth, the doom of the false lover, the marvellous beauty of these verses telling how the Rose Mary fancies her mother knew of her guilt, the force of the lines telling how the sin of Rose Mary became known to her mother.

“Closely locked they cling without speech,  
And the mirrored souls shook each to each,  
As the cloud-moon and the water-moon  
Shake face to face when the dim stars swoon,  
In stormy bowers of the night’s mid-noon.”

The stormy tragic directness of the lines when she tells her of the slain man, the terrible pitiful loveliness of these others, sacred and splendid and sad with their swift keen simplicity, when the mother finds the message on the dead man’s breast, how the face, late so fair, became very hateful, being now known, her bitter taunt as she throws down the lock of golden hair, the wealth of perfect words in the passage where Rose Mary strikes and breaks the beryl-stone, the faint, serene echoes of heavenly speech, falling like the blessing of the dew, fitly and fairly crowning the whole with their perfect music; these things, I say, place this poem on the very highest level of romantic art.

By this poem, as by no other, is Rossetti’s claim of mastery made certain. And this claim is made more firm and lasting by the “King’s Tragedy” and “The White Ship.” These last works are very simple and direct. In the whole range of romantic poetry no clearer vision has been made known to us than the picture in the “Rose Mary” of the mother hurrying

down the winding stair and getting swift glimpses of the hillside and woodland and stream through the narrow windows, or in the "King's Tragedy," of the woman meeting James by the Scottish sea, or in the hush of night in Perth.

"Last night at mid-watch, by Aberdour,  
When the moon was dead in the skies,  
O king, in a death-light of thine own  
I saw thy shape arise.

And in full season, as erst I said,  
The doom had gained its growth ;  
And the shroud had risen above the neck  
And covered thine eyes and mouth.

And no moon woke, but the pale dawn broke,  
And still thy soul stood there ;  
And I thought its silence cried to my soul  
As the first rays crowned its hair.

Since then have I journeyed fast and fain  
In very despite of fate,  
Lest hope might still be found in God's will ;  
But they drove me from thy gate.

For every man on God's ground, O king,  
His death grows up from his birth  
In a shadow plant perpetually ;  
And thine towers high, a black yew tree,  
O'er the charterhouse of Perth !"

Such touches as these give the world assurance of a great poet. For such an one is measured, not by his execution, not by his felicity or suavity of touch, but by his breadth of human sympathy, by his knowledge of human passion.

We have heard it claimed for Rossetti that his work must be measured by special critical rules, that it is not like other work. I do not feel this. I hold that whatever in him cannot be widely understood is of little

moment in his poetry or painting. I appeal to the catholic criticism, which understands his masters, Shakespeare and Dante. I appeal from the fashion that praises, as from the folly that blames, from the affectation of esoteric comprehension, on the one hand, as from the affectation of fastidious puritanism on the other. I appeal to the force and fervour, to the passion and pity of "Jenny," to the severe beauty, to the whole spiritual meaning of the sonnets, with their large view of life and love and death, to the sweet and sacred perfection of "The Blessed Damozel" and "My Sister's Sleep," to the high and clear light of "Ave" and "Staff and Scrip," to the rich and splendid music of "Love's Nocturne" and the "Stream's Secret," to the strength and significance of "The Burden of Nineveh" and "Dante at Verona," to the changing emotions and weird weaving of love and hate, of despair and hope, of things human and devilish and divine in the "Rose Mary" to the great and grave force of the "King's Tragedy" and the "White Ship," I appeal to these qualities in these poems as I appeal to the power and pathos and passion of all great singers ; the criticism which is broad enough for these last is broad enough for Rossetti too. If special criticism be needed for any one it is assuredly for those who crawl beneath the board to pick up the scraps from the feast of their betters. For the thousand and one small piping rhymsters, who affect the manner of speech of all great men, for the whole tribe of parodists and plagiarists, a newer and other criticism is necessary, a criticism so broad as to include all inanity and feebleness whatever. Nor is this cry unknown with reference to his pictures. Again I appeal to "The Girlhood of the Virgin," to the "Annunciation," to "Found," to the sombre and nobly

subdued colour of the "Dream of Dante," the majesty and repose of the "Blessed Damozel," the triumphant force and superb splendour and glory of "Fiametta," the beauty and dim inner gaze of "Memory," the perfect and ordered harmony of "Silence," the power and majesty of "How they met Themselves," the strange legendary feeling of the design "Michael Scott's Weaving," the brilliance and breadth of the "Blue Bower," the rich suffused depth of twilight tone in "The Virgin at the house of John," the mediæval directness of imagination and mastery of clear colour and delicate design of character and expression in the "St George." What vitality is in these works is precisely the vitality present in the work of Titian, of Giorgione, of Leonardo da Vinci, of Fra Angelico,—his nearest kin on art's side;—precisely these qualities, on whose various degrees of presence we judge to be greater or less, the works of Velasquez and Rembrandt, of Turner, of Millet, of Michael Angelo.

In the space there is left at my disposal I can only refer briefly to his shorter poems, to his translations and his sonnets on pictures. Two poems, however, I should like to mention as being, to my mind, especially beautiful, the "Cloud Confines" and "Sunset Wings." I quote the latter of these, for its beautiful record of nature, its true mingling of painter's and poet's vision. You may with justice regard this as a connecting link between his song and art, although very many other poems stand in the same central place.

"To-night this sunset spreads two golden wings,  
Cleaving the western sky;  
Winged too with wind it is, and winnowings,  
Of birds; as if the day's last hour in rings  
Of strenuous flight must die.

Sun-steeped in fire, the homeward pinions away  
Above the dovecot tops ;  
And clouds of starlings, ere they rest with day,  
Sink, clamorous like mill-waters, at wild play,  
By turns in every copse.

Each tree heart-deep the wrangling rout receives,  
Save for the whirr within,  
You could not tell the starlings from the leaves ;  
Then one great puff of wings, and the swarm heaves  
Away with all its din.

Ever thus hope's hours, in ever-eddying flight,  
To many a refuge tend ;  
With the first light she laughed, and the last light  
Glow round her still ; who, nathless in the night,  
At length must make an end.

And now the mustering rooks innumerable ?  
Together sail and soar,  
While for the day's death, like a tolling knell,  
Unto the heart they seem to cry, Farewell,  
No more, farewell, no more !

Is not hope plumed, as 'twere a fiery dart ?  
And oh ! thou dying day,  
Even as thou goest, must she too depart,  
And sorrow fold such pinions on the heart  
As will not fly away ?"

It seems to me that Rossetti did not express himself in painting with that fulness and force so characteristic of the sister art. But to some extent his poetry and painting, leaving the fields peculiar to each, seem to meet in a land midway between, and we see as it were painted poems and written pictures ; a borderland, in a figure, of our life, whence we have great glimpses into the quiet places of souls outside our being. His expression of this is twofold, each single expression inadequate, but both explanatory, and in great measure clearly, not like Blake, vaguely visionary, but as

Plato and Dante, following the path of life into the arcana of pure being. On this borderland he has wandered, and his pictures, with their mystic symbols and strange mingling of body and soul, give partial expression to his visions. In his picture of Michael Scott's wooing there are dim forms bending over and looking in from the outer world. In the Sonnets he has pictured such pale, wistful faces gazing into our life, old memories, ghosts of lost days and sinful things, sweet and sorrowful eyes of those who walk in willowwood. These are again shown in that marvellous sequence of pictures, which holds a position in his painting analogous to that held in his poetry by his sonnets. Let us consider these. Rossetti's art, let us frankly recognise, was one-sided. True, it was the nobler side of things he saw, but to him much of the outer world was as a dream. In his later work there is to some extent a greater breadth of grasp, a greater feeling for the pathos of human life, but also a growing mysticism. There is, in all the series of heads to which I have referred, a certain vagueness of emotion, as of a dim remembrance of sorrow, some faint, half-heard echo of joy, some strange after-glow of a vanished love, all things are etherealised, seen calmly, quietly, in the dim vesper light of far-away days. They come to us as a new thing, but have, too, the keen, sweet quality of a half remembered music heard in swift momentary pulsations. They seem primal facts of our life, memory and purity and lost love, circled by all subtle, symbolical suggestions, as the strong, massive, weighty force of thought in his sonnets is surrounded by the flower-like beauty of gracious fancies.

This mental position was characteristic of mediæval

art. In the old Pre-Raffaelite work, and to a great extent in the work of Raffaelle, Michael Angelo, Titian, Giorgione, Leonardo da Vinci, passion and joy, all sorrowful and serene changes of life are seen in a retrospective vision. In Giorgione's great Venetian Pastoral in the Louvre, all nature seems a dream; the men and women are very calm and quiet in that hushed and golden air. The music even has ceased, but its thin, ethereal breath still lingers and wanders, mingled with the faint and tender touch of gently refluent water. But to such painters, as to all men, came sometimes the surge of a great passion, a strong consciousness that the world is too large to pass as a dream. Outside their dusky orchard close, with its twilight of rich, solemn, luminous colours, there is the infinite sorrow and the pain of finite souls that yearn. Rossetti felt this, but his art required that it should be expressed in a lower key, as an echo. He paints, no less than the great men of other ages, the dominant and the supreme moments of existence. The note of a whole life is struck in such pictures as "The Death of Lady Macbeth," "The Carlisle Towers," "The Hesterna Rosa," "The Return of Tibullus to Delia;" yet the emotion is purified, as it were; translated from the terror, the swift, fugitive pulse of passion, into the calm, pure region of beauty. The work deals not so much with the incidental outcome as the deep spiritual principles whence it springs. It is a retrospective vision. We hear the tale, we feel the emotion, as we feel it in Keats, while the nightingale sang in the woods under the throbbing purple of the summer night. There is no finer wording of this quality of emotion than in Rossetti's sonnet to the Madonna of the Rocks by Leonardo da Vinci. One who examines

the picture and carefully reads the sonnet, gets a wonderful insight into Rossetti's individuality.

“ Mother, is this the darkness of the end,  
 The shadow of death? and is that outer sea  
 Infinite imminent eternity?  
 And does the death-pang, by man's seed sustained  
 In time's each instant, cause thy face to bend  
 Its silent prayer upon the Son, while he  
 Blesses the dead with his hand silently  
 To his long day, which hours no more offend?  
 Mother of Grace, the pass is difficult,  
 Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered souls  
 Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through;  
 Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice extols,  
 Whose pean abides in the dark avenue  
 Amid the bitterness of things occult.”

There are two phases of the higher artistic emotion. Some men have no knowledge of life but as a dimly remote memory; it comes to them from far away, not otherwise than as one might behold forms in a mirror.

“ Deep in the gleaming glass  
 She sees all past things pass,  
 And all sweet life that was  
 Lie down and die.”

The work of Morris in the present day shows much of this quality.

The other way seems to me to be the manner of some of the greatest artists of all time. From the height of a great exaltation the speech of this world becomes thin and scarcely heard, all small and trivial things are silent, only the voices of humanity are heard any more. The accidental, the momentary fades away. In the loneliness of lofty thought a wider view of the life is gained, the artistic work is beautiful and very calm; there is in it that simplicity, that largeness we feel when we see a wide stretch of meadow land, of mountain, of forest, and broad gleams of water,

united, glorified in the soft radiance of a golden afternoon. Rossetti stood midway between these.

In his little poem of St. Hilary he has shown how impossible it is for one to escape from this world. Into the land of clear colours and stories of his art enters the strange murmur of the outer humanity.

One afternoon, tired of work, I had been wandering through the Latin quarter of Paris. By chance, I crossed the bridge and found myself under the shadow of the fair *Sainte Chapelle*. Climbing a narrow stair I emerged from the din and the laughter, from the mire of the streets, into that dreamlike church, so sacred, so splendid, so rich with the most holy memories of old-time chivalry, with the sweetest and purest flowerage of old-time thought and art, with its infinite subtlety of radiant and luminous and gorgeous colours, with its streaming glories of jewelled light, its gracious tracery of perfect lines, its utter quiet and loneliness, filled and thrilled with the very peace of heaven, here, if at all, surely here, in this saintly shrine, should all the sound of earth be hushed. But after a little space I heard the dull strained sounds of the great life without rushing past, as flow terribly, foully, under bridge and quay, the waters of the dark stream. I left the chapel; a few steps and I had re-entered the city of *Francois Villon*, of *Victor Hugo*, and I saw the towers, so significant, of *Notre Dame de Paris*, under whose shadow, on summer afternoons, lies the *Morgue*.

In such a land of quiet beauty Rossetti dwelt, but not always. When touched into realism (as men call it) he used other means of expression. The glowing wrath of the sonnet on the "Refusal of Aid between Nations," that on "The Bastille," and that other on the "Survivors of Trafalgar," give evidence of differ-

ent powers. But his instinct turned to the quiet repose of earliest art. The truly artistic mind is ever instinctive, it is not scientific ; it is affected by feeling, it gains an impression. This impression may often be partial and even wrong, but it is the result of certain qualities in the object, being coincident with certain qualities in the mind of the artist. Truth is arrived at, not by analytic means, but by a synthetic method. It is proportioned by chance drifts of apprehension, by stray waifs of fact and of fancy. The after-work of moulding, purifying, and refining is almost of a quite objective character. It is, to some extent, mere artizan work. There is of course a necessary exercise of the very finest qualities of his nature, but the real artistic spirit is chiefly occupied with the prior and less tangible task of instinctive acquisition and assimilation. We see the character of a man in his work, because we feel he chooses certain effects above others : not by his technical powers, but by the same qualities of mind which influence his selection, is touched into life his method of expression. This the raiment ; the body making present the shadowy intangible soul. It is of no use merely as a means of recording the fleeting impression. So soon as this becomes a compulsory exercise of research, of analysis, of critical inquisitiveness, it fades to a lower place. These things belong to impression entirely. This seems to me very chiefly a quality of Rossetti, as it is the quality of all the finest art. When one has grasped his idea, his beautiful, subtle expression is forgotten. It is in perfect sympathy with the soul of his art, now severe, grave, simple ; now dainty, polished, clear, superb ; now rich, shadowy, mysterious.

You know the story of the Lady of Shalott. She

saw all the world in a mirror till she became sick of shadows, and turned to the living, throbbing world itself. Rossetti's art is different. He turned from the world to the semblance; he saw a strange, radiant image, the primal truths, as one looking through a prism sees the colour of common objects reduced to their primitive tint, the grey of life changed into intensest rose and gold and heavenly blue.

It was the boast of Goodwin that he would write a book of such a nature that no one reading it could remain the same manner of man any longer. So it is with Rossetti's pictures. No one who ever has clearly felt his influence can lose it; for his view of the value and significance of life is widened, and a new hope for art is awakened. The art tendency of the present day is towards truth, and we may expect much crude effort toward that end. As a factor in raising the ideal, in showing that truth is more than a mere literal transcript of nature, that it is a subtle and holy thing, Rossetti's work will be of very great value. As a phase of art it is not my wish, as it is not in my power, to estimate its importance.

It may be that I have laid too great accentuation on the artistic side of Rossetti's nature. I have been, however, far from forgetting the ethical tendency of his work. This seems to me to be no insignificant feature of his genius: all the more so because it is in a great measure unconscious. He has not the direct force of religious or philosophical teaching so openly evident in the work of Browning, not the swift, strong insight which gives value to the critical quasi-pessimism of Arnold; not the agnostic hopelessness of Clough, nor the comparatively firm faith which informs with fervour and with light the verse of Mrs. Browning or

of Tennyson ; but he has that quality present in all their poetry ; that sympathy, that pity for the foiled, circuitous wanderer, for the ever-eluded grasp of eager, human souls. This, to some extent the key-note of modern thought, finds expression in his poem, "Cloud Confines," not unmixed with the clear melody of a triumphant song.

"The day is dark and the night  
 To him that would search their heart ;  
 No lips of cloud that will part  
 Nor morning song in the light :  
 Only, gazing alone,  
 To him wild shadows are shown,  
 Deep under deep unknown,  
 And height above unknown height.  
 Still we say as we go,—  
 'Strange to think by the way,  
 Whatever there is to know,  
 That shall we know one day.'

"The past is over and fled ;  
 Named new, we name it the old ;  
 Thereof some tale hath been told,  
 But no word comes from the dead ;  
 Whether at all they be,  
 Or whether as bond or free,  
 Or whether they too were we,  
 Or by what spell they have sped.  
 Still we say as we go,—  
 'Strange to think by the way,  
 Whatever there is to know,  
 That shall we know one day.'

"What of the heart of hate  
 That beats in thy breast, O time ?  
 Red strife from the furthest prime,  
 And anguish of fierce debate ;  
 War that shatters her slain,  
 And peace that grinds them as grain,  
 And eyes fixed ever in vain  
 On the pitiless eyes of fate.

Still we say as we go,—  
‘Strange to think by the way,  
Whatever there is to know,  
That shall we know one day.’

“What of the heart of love  
That bleeds in thy breast, O man ?  
Thy kisses snatched ‘neath the ban  
Of fangs that mock them above ;  
Thy bells prolonged unto knells,  
Thy hope that a breath dispels,  
Thy bitter forlorn farewells,  
And the empty echoes thereof ?  
Still we say as we go,—  
‘Strange to think by the way,  
Whatever there is to know,  
That shall we know one day.’

“The sky leans dumb on the sea,  
Aweary with all its wings ;  
And oh ! the song the sea sings  
Is dark everlastingly.  
Our past is clean forgot,  
Our present is and is not,  
Our future’s a sealed seedplot,  
And what betwixt them are we ?  
We who say as we go—  
‘Strange to think by the way,  
Whatever there is to know,  
That shall we know one day.”

But although his last work, it is not his only expression of his ethical position. Here and there it is heard, in the tendency of most of his poems, chiefly and sufficiently in the marvellous spiritual introspection of the sonnets.

He has wrought as did the old Italian painter to whom appeared his own soul saying—“Take now thine art unto thee, and paint me thus, as I am, to know me; weak, as I am and in the weeds of this time ; only with eyes which seek out labour, and with a faith not learned, yet jealous of prayer. Do this ; so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more.”

Art done in this spirit must be lasting, for it touches eternal truths, and will have life when much of our present day work, dealing with the momentary and fleeting fashion of the hour, shall have passed into the darkness with fit companionship of tongues that have ceased and of knowledge that has vanished away.

And again, further, when we think how much of his influence is found in the beauty and force and delicate finish of Morris, in the strength and lyric speed and perfect, plastic, verbal power of Swinburne, in the calm, pure design and clear, sweet colour of Burne Jones; how much of his influence is found in the work of his brother artists, Holman Hunt, Madox Brown, and Millais, and through them in all that is highest and best in present-day English art and song, we feel that to us this man brought no common gift.

He has left us a noble heritage. From the inner shrine and very treasure-house of beauty he has brought, as of old time was brought to Balaustion, glory of the golden word and passion of the picture,—or, to use his own image, there have been born to life these two children—

“*Song*, whose hair  
Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath;  
And *Art*, whose eyes were worlds by God found fair.”

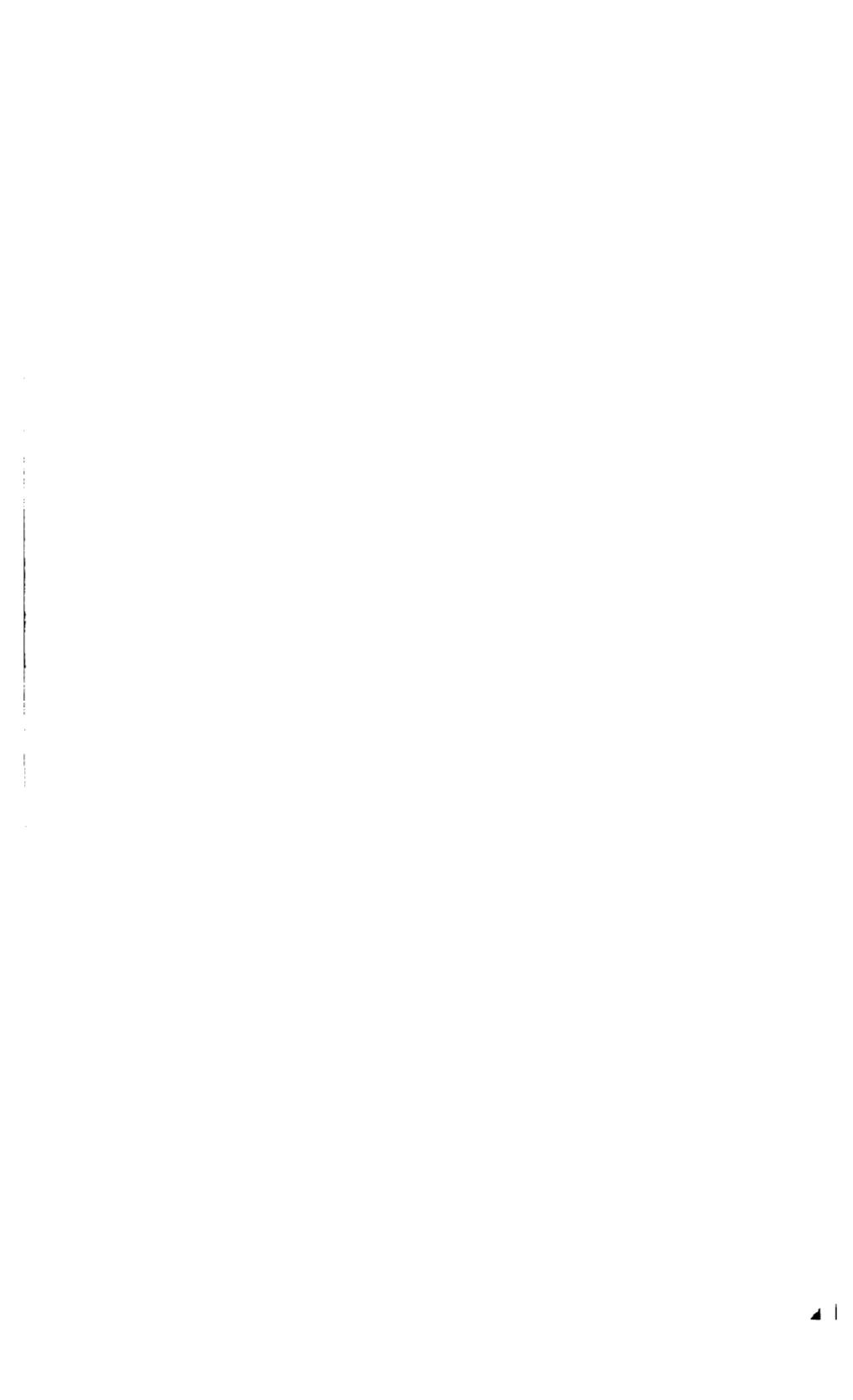
And if, as in the perfect phrase of this sonnet, the latest birth of Life be Death, as her three first-born were Love and Art and Song, yet two that she has borne to him—Art, namely, and Song—shall not now be subject to that last, that Life and Love with it may pass away, but that very surely no death that ever may be born shall have power upon these for ever.

P. W. NICHOLSON.









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